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In My Opinion: Arizona-style law in Florida would be crazy

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Oh my God! Just when many of us thought that Arizona's anti-immigration law was a legal aberration drifting into oblivion, the Florida Legislature is considering a similar law that could affect all Hispanics in one of the states most dependent on Latin American tourism, trade and real estate investments.

Nearly one year after Arizona passed its controversial law, which was suspended by a judge after being challenged by the Justice Department, crusades to pass similar laws have failed in about 22 states, including Colorado and Mississippi. But immigration advocacy groups say Arizona-styled bills are gaining ground in four state legislatures: Florida, Oklahoma, Alabama and South Carolina.

"I think they are likely to pass a bill that is really bad for Florida," says Subhash Kateel, an organizer with the Florida Immigrant Coalition (FLIC,) a group that defends immigrants. "Whether it's 'Arizona light,' 'Arizona-medium' or 'Arizona-heavy,' it's going to hurt all Floridians."

A Florida Senate bill originally inspired by the Arizona bill has already passed the Judiciary Committee, and may soon head for the full Senate floor. An even more stringent anti-immigration bill that mirrors the Arizona law is being debated in the state's House Judiciary Committee.

Whatever comes out of both committees is likely to be changed for the worse once it goes to the full Legislature, where many Republican lawmakers are known to support stringent anti-immigration enforcement laws, Kateel told me.

Florida's Republican governor Rick Scott has said he supports Arizona-style laws, which order state police to demand people's immigration papers whenever there is a "reasonable suspicion" that they may be illegally in the country. Critics fear that that would lead to racial profiling and police harassment of all Hispanics, regardless of their legal status.

"The Florida bills seem to have momentum," says Frank Sharry, head of America's Voice, a Washington-based group supporting immigrant rights. "It seems almost unthinkable that a state like Florida, that depends so heavily on trade, tourism and Hispanic entrepreneurs and workers, would pass legislation that would almost inevitably invite boycotts, cancelled conventions, and have a chilling effect on Latin American trade and tourism."

Republican State Senator Anitere Flores, author of the Senate bill, did not answer several calls to her office and cellphone. A nervous legislative assistant e-mailed me a statement by her boss saying that she has “never been in favor of any Arizona-style law,” and that her bill limits police enforcement to “only those who are convicted of a crime.”

But critics say the bill would encourage state police to act as immigration officers, and would open the floodgates for an Arizona-style bill. They say that — short of a comprehensive bill at the national level that would both secure the borders and provide an earned path to citizenship to millions of undocumented residents — any enforcement-only bill would be turned into more draconian legislation once it reaches the Senate floor.

What about the claim by anti-immigration crusaders that Florida and other states can't afford their current levels of undocumented residents at a time of massive budget cuts?

A recently-released study by the Florida Chamber of Commerce Foundation says that while the state's undocumented immigrants' costs related to prisons and education can be estimated at \$659 million a year, immigrant workers in Florida contribute an average of \$4.5 billion in tax revenues a year. What's more, total spending of overseas visitors to Florida exceeds \$7 billion a year, and foreign direct investment to Florida exceeds \$34 billion, the study says.

“If people of foreign birth perceive Florida to be a hostile environment to them, it is natural that they would visit less and invest less,” Florida Chamber of Commerce Foundation president Dale Brill told me. “Those negative perceptions could have a negative impact on our economy.”

My opinion: I agree. When Arizona passed its little-disguised anti-Hispanic immigration law, several U.S. cities, foreign states and business organizations boycotted that state, in addition of casting it around the world as a symbol of racial intolerance. Arizona lost \$141 million in cancelled meetings and tourism income just in the first four months after the bill's passage, according to press reports.

If that was a dumb legislation in Arizona, it would be outright insane in Florida, which lives of foreign tourism, trade and investments. I'm usually pretty good at writing with a cool head, but this time I can only ask: are they nuts?